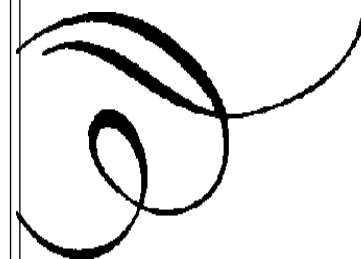


RESURRECTING A SMALL LIBRARY

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hat can you say about a small library and not make it suspiciously reminiscent of a eulogy? Most are under-funded, understaffed, under-maintained, and often neglected by those communities served.

The small community library is hardly the lifelong place of employment sought by today's college graduate with a mound of debt and high expectations.

Unfortunately, many small libraries are in trouble and could be considered for the endangered species list. Why? It's quite simple: They don't attract attention unless they are in trouble. It is a sad reality of our society that when things are going well no one wants to hear about you. A library is supposed to keep quiet, keep operating, and keep providing services to those lucky few aware of the library's valued existence in the community. The same could be said for the Poseyville Carnegie Public Library in Poseyville, Indiana.

This library possesses a proud history. Andrew Carnegie donated the sum of \$5,000 with an additional \$500 for furnishings, and the library opened April 20, 1905 with approximately 1,000 volumes and 18 of the best periodicals covering many fields of literature. Further plans were devised and then scrapped, and in the 97 years of her existence only five librarians have served the public from within her walls. Until there was a major

renovation two years ago, she had remained as she originally was, with the exception of some paint, a back door and steps, and an indoor toilet. The Poseyville Carnegie Public Library now contains approximately 12,000 volumes in addition to a rapidly expanding collection of videotapes, DVDs, CDs, and audiotapes.

The Library serves an estimated population base of over 4,500 but receives additional patronage from outside our coverage area in Posey County and from two adjacent counties.

Virtually any small business owner will tell you that advertising and/or public relations are the backbone of their success. They just cannot survive without it; however, a public library is not a "business" in the classical sense. Too often a library neglects to even provide a line item for public relations or any advertising whatsoever other than required budget announcements. The hiring of a public relations person is the furthest thing from the minds of most small library boards and when one is actually hired, it is often too late or too expensive for success.

For example, a newly hired public relations person from a larger library recently approached me for advice. Her predecessor had resigned in frustration after only

three weeks on the job with little more accomplished than community introduction. New to the job she was expected to reestablish those contacts, stimulate public interest in the library, establish new programs involving adult, teen, and preteen, and provide public relations materials for the library. She had also been told not to spend money.

As the director of a small town library I, too, had been faced by what seemed a no-win situation and had been on my own. From the beginning public

relations efforts on behalf of our library countered resistance. After all, there hadn't been any need for it in the past, so why start now? I was told to be content with sending an occasional press release; besides, the library was doing just fine. That was when the board and I disagreed.



Above: The Poseyville Carnegie Public Library

Prior to 1999 the average attendance was at a stagnate 75 on a good month with the majority female in their upper sixties. Ninety percent of those utilizing the library were not within her walls but a few minutes, and adult romances and mysteries were the hottest ticket items over all else on the shelves. Children's books, primarily preschool texts, were the only other center of interest at the library while reference books sat collecting dust. Program activities were limited to daytime summer reading for preschoolers once each month for three months and we did not have any computers until the board applied for a grant in 1997.

For some time now people have been saying you need to think outside of the box. As a librarian, you not only have to think out of the box, you need to think outside of the universe of accepted ideas and step boldly onto traditional toes. You must get yourself noticed by those you serve before you are able to serve them. It is the only way many small libraries are going to hope for survival in the twenty-first century. The old ideas just don't work as well as they did in the past.

From my own standpoint, some of that stepping out and exploring involved finding out what our community found newsworthy about our library. Asking local reporters their slant for a good public relations story helped build contacts and trust within their ranks. These two things alone presented a plethora of opportunities just waiting to be created.

A public relations person must hold sanctity the media's methods. A relationship with mutual understanding should be established with an editor or reporter concerning press releases; as with a newspaper medium, releases are a dime a dozen unless you have something spectacular in the works. More attention will be given if you take the time to write your own stories keeping the public abreast of upcoming events scheduled, and providing artwork and photos that are camera-ready. Also allow the reporter to cover all library board meetings. Keep in mind it is a must to document and archive all information as it may become useful in the future even if a story isn't forthcoming at the present time.

Photos work wonders even if not published. They've proved to be a major source of interest in our library. I brought in an old 35mm SLR with a roll of black and white film and began taking photographs of everything I thought was of community interest. Someone reading one of the new magazines, teens gathered around a computer using the Internet, two people playing chess. We began keeping a scrapbook containing published photos by our local newspaper and those I took myself.

I kept this up for months until people began mentioning that it appeared that we had something

going on all the time. I now use a digital camera, sending photos as attachments to stories on 3.5 diskettes. While the quality is about the same, it is just easier and saves scanning time. Photographers are sent for special events and our scrapbook has become a collection of disks in a three-ring binder. The library is being noticed.

Be aware that conducting surveys in a local newspaper is a pointless venture; you should consider yourself lucky if you receive a 10 percent return. A few years before I became director, a survey was conducted this way and only one patron responded. A better method is to start circulating informational surveys by hand. Actually place them in the hands of your patrons and wait for them to complete them. Utilize a simple "yes" or "no" 25-question survey distributed randomly throughout your service area. Multiple-choice surveys should be kept at three or four questions at the most. Surveys, verbally one-on-one with patrons or in written form, should cover topics such as reading materials desired and improvements that would benefit the library itself and its patrons. My first survey sampled 100 local individuals from our service area and resulted in a 100 percent return.

These were my less-than-thrilling results: 21 percent of those who knew of the library said we didn't have anything for teenagers in the community, 41 percent indicated the library needed to modernize, 62 percent thought we needed to add hours, 54 percent indicated they would enjoy the library more if the silence rule were reduced or eliminated (a rule that was never enforced as no one stayed in the library), and 71 percent hadn't a clue the library even existed. The people living on the same street thought the library was abandoned. And honestly, until 1996, even I had no idea Poseyville had a library despite being a lifelong resident of the county. We were truly one of the best-kept secrets in the county.

Raising the community's awareness of library services in our covered area was an anticipated challenge but I knew if it succeeded, the rest of our public relations problems would be simple. Nothing was going on during the 21 hours we were open, so I brought in computer games for Saturday activities, started a chess club on Thursday evenings, and a Pokemon card-trading club on Tuesday evenings. Video- and audio-tapes were added to the collection and made available free of charge for two-week intervals.

Interest and creativity blossomed and the library started offering events like cartoon and adventure movies, hopscotch tournaments, and tic-tac-toe and limbo contests. Virtually all events were either low in cost or donated free of charge by local businesses or parents. And then I did the unthinkable by allowing talking in the library with stipulations that if a patron



Above: Thursday night chess club at the Library

objected, the rule would be invoked in certain reading areas. Attendance rose so sharply that during scheduled events people could not find a place to park on the street near the library.

In 2000, we were still open 21 hours weekly and renovating the building. Our attendance hovered at an unmanageable 1,000 a month and by the end of 2001 the renovation had concluded and we had expanded our hours to be open 40 hours/week. Our monthly attendance stabilized at 900 and parents were calling the library first when looking for their children.

The year 2001 brought on even more library activities as we held our first Halloween Party with 175 in costume. It remained the talk of the area for weeks. Our first Easter Egg Hunt in 2002 resulted in 44 children and adult participants. The library's adult computer literacy program has blossomed from a single course to three, despite a serious shortage of computer stations and funding for the instructor, and demand for these programs remain relentless. The average annual new patron registration stands at 250 compared to 50 in the two years previous to my becoming director.

The counties served by Poseyville Carnegie Public Library are mainly rural but every effort is made to serve citizens of all ages and backgrounds who would otherwise find informational services a barrier. We continue our quest to modernize and bring technol-



Above: Summer Beach Reading Program

ogy to our service area and have received grants that have enabled us to offer five computers while donations have resulted in an additional four along with related hardware. Books, videotapes, and music CDs are donated monthly as well. We have our own website,

have built a server for \$500 out of spare parts, designed our own computer program for Internet security, and have a card-cataloging program we offer free to Indiana libraries. We have also established a nonprofit organization we call "Tools for Children" where old donated computers are refurbished and given away to developmentally challenged children and adults nationwide.

The library now possesses an ongoing extensive public relations campaign that utilizes a multitude of media coverage ranging from newspaper and radio press releases, as well as live television interviews. The addition of our Internet website has also allowed patrons and the community to access the Poseyville Carnegie Public Library at www.librarydirector.com for activities sponsored by the library and those programs are given attention in our local schools. My personal commitment to the community is further strengthened by involving myself in organizations that promote the value of learning as a lifelong endeavor. There truly is nothing better than to see the epiphany as a patron grasps the knowledge of what seemed the impossible.

Creativity and hard work and finding the pulse of the community are essential in helping it realize the wondrous opportunities a small library can offer. This is what a public relations person and library director should thrive on. My approach may have ruffled a few feathers and stepped on a few toes, but here is what proves that my approach at the Poseyville Carnegie Public Library has succeeded in fulfilling the community's need: There are days when I arrive that patrons are waiting and people in the community are volunteering their time and money. And occasionally someone even tells one of the board members that we've done something wonderful.

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